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Description of the Project

This project had its start from an invitation by the Sloan Foundation to write a book in their autobiography series. At first, the invitation seemed unattractive: I have found most scientists' autobiographies dull and self-serving, even conveying a misleading impression of unique dedication and intellectual sophistication. In part this seems to reflect a profound "loyalty" of scientists to their profession as well as to the subject matter of their work. Reflection on the reasons for my reaction to such writings, however, produced the seed of the project I will be engaged in.

What I would like to do in my autobiographical book is to develop an approach to a person's life (mainly but not only my own) and a person's biography -- the literary construct of the life in question -- not through a recounting of events, activities, or influences, but through an analysis of the "commitments" that an individual makes at various times in life as a guide to future actions. By commitments I intend those devices, some conscious, some unconscious, which the individual adopts and internalizes in order to make activity possible without falling into paralyzing conflicts or immobilizing contemplation of the futility of life.

The actual commitments vary from person to person, they may wax or wane or change subtly with time and experience. I wish to examine whether the commitment process, while occurring in all individuals, may play a special role in the life of intellectuals. I believe that the exploration of one's own commitments (religious, social, political, intellectual, sentimental, stylistic) and of the interactions among

various commitments represents a major part of the "inner life" of the individual, the more so the more refined the insights.

In existential terms, the set of commitments represents the means an individual employs in struggling against the absurdity of conscious but purposeless life. In that sense it may be said that the set of commitments constitutes the inner structure of the individual: in other words, the self.

In the above terms, particularly in the light of my own life's adventure, I would attempt to explore, for example, the roots of scientific activity in a generally unscientific society. I also would contrast the scientific commitment -- its strength and weakness -- with other commitments, for example, to literature, poetry, and the arts, and to examine the elements of conflict that underlie these different activities within the life of a single person.

My aim is not "candor" since I believe no such thing can exist, a thesis I hope to illustrate. Rather, I propose a pragmatic exploration into the underpinning of a personality, searching less for starry moments than for meaningful anecdotes and revealing tensions. Thus, the emotional relation with a master or teacher may be more meaningfully revealed by the recall of a cutting remark or a minor slight than by an adoring, guilt-filled portrait such as scientists often paint of each other. People don't forget; they sublimate the memory of interpersonal experiences into their own set of commitments.

It is my hope that an autobiography presenting an individual with a rather tortured personality, different from the serene image that autobiographies of scientists usually convey, may be interesting. It is not my purpose to debunk the pretenses of some scientists, but rather

to explore the relation between personality and scientific activity; which commitments are compatible, which mutually exclusive, and which are sources of conflicts. In recent history, only J. D. Watson's The Double Helix revealed the humane interplay between science and personality, but Watson's book was only a fragment of autobiography. My own history, of a biologist trained as a physician with a minor but critically important encounter with physics; with a history of flirtation with arts, abandonment of religion, radical involvement in politics, and deep emotional crises should provide a reasonably interesting material with which to develop the key theme, that of the struggle to create a self by adopting specific commitments, which become guidelines and loyalties.

A particularly interesting aspect should be the relation of the commitment to science to other commitments such as wealth, success, and friendship. Most important may be an exploration of commitment to rationality, its coexistence with its opposite as in art, the mechanism of compartmentalization, and the divergent loyalties thus engendered. I hope to illustrate how certain commitments, including those to science and art, may inspire a strong loyalty because their objects appear to be part of the intellectual enterprise of mankind, which may therefore have some intrinsic significance. Essentially I plan to write an existentialist book in line with my own philosophy of life. It will, however, be an autobiography, not a philosophical disquisition.

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